

First Universalist Church of Rochester

COVID Task Force

Report to the Board of Trustees October 7, 2021

Over the period of the last several weeks, the COVID Taskforce has explored a variety of sources of information and guidance about opening our church for worship and other activities. We have been in contact with Rev Renee Rucholski from our UUA region, COVID planners from First Unitarian Church of Rochester, the Executive Director of All Souls Unitarian Church in DC, and a representative of the COVID Infectious Disease/Epidemiology team at URM. In addition, we have had contact with numerous members of our own congregation through a recent Town Hall meeting and informal conversation. As a result of all these consultations, we have reached agreement on recommendations to the Board.

First, here is a summary of our consultations. The UUA continues to suggest that congregations devise decision making flow charts based on levels of community experience of COVID infection, including incidence of infection, utilization of health resources and proportion of the population that is immunized. After much discussion, the COVID Taskforce has decided that there is no demonstrably scientific way to correlate this suggested information with actual safety of activities in our church building. How are we to determine what level of community infection short of complete eradication of the virus represents adequate predictable safety for church members in attendance at worship? The CDC and NY State public health authorities have ceased giving advice to us about this.

In the context of varying and conflicting guidelines from CDC and UUA, many congregations, including All Souls, the Canton UU Church and First Unitarian Church in Rochester have all decided to meet in person for worship; some are already doing so. All are requiring immunization and mask wearing among attendees.

Our consultation with URM Infectious Disease personnel has been the most helpful to us in assessing the safety of activities in our own building. They have reached their conclusions both through extensive review of the literature on COVID and also through consultation with Monroe County Public Health authorities. We have accepted the following of their conclusions: Fully immunized persons who wear masks in their social contacts are at extremely low risk of contracting COVID whether they are in contact with infected or non-infected individuals. They are also at extremely low risk of transmitting the disease. Non-immunized individuals significantly reduce their risk of becoming infected and therefore disseminating illness by wearing masks and maintaining social distance. These conclusions hold true whether a community is experiencing high, moderate or low levels of COVID infection.

We have discovered through our conversations with church members that there is significant interest in returning to in-person worship. Among those who have participated in our forums, there is acceptance of mandatory mask wearing and universal immunization as conditions of gathered worship in the building.

Based on the information from URM and our congregation, and in collaboration with First Unitarian, we make the following recommendations:

The church should consider opening its building for worship on Sunday November 7, requesting that all who attend in person be fully vaccinated and requiring all to wear appropriately fitted masks. We suggest that although we expect all to be immunized, we should not require proof of that status but rather expect compliance as a matter of trust. Although the literature is unclear about the importance of social distancing among those who are fully immunized and masked, we suggest that the church make social distancing accommodation, to be worked out with the House Committee.

In the context of our understanding of the balance between maximum safety and the value of social discourse as a part of gathered worship, we suggest that some form of informal social gathering following the service be planned. This gathering should not be a “Coffee Hour” since no food or drink can be consumed while masked. How this is arranged will depend on the size of the gathering. While our sanctuary can safely accommodate all who might attend worship, the Clara Barton Lounge may be too small a space to allow everyone to gather safely.

As we have agreed in the past, any gathered worship service should also be available to those who choose not to attend in person through some form of electronic audio/visual broadcast. This will require additional technical planning and support.

We have been concerned in the past about how to include families with non-immunized children in our planning. It appears likely that immunizations will be available for all school age children by the end of this winter. Families with non immunized children are planning to participate through virtual worship until then.

In the past the Taskforce has recommended that small groups could meet in the church in the Clara Barton Lounge or the Sanctuary as long as all members of each group feel comfortable meeting in person. We now recommend that the building should be open immediately for meetings of small groups whose covenant includes that every member meeting in person be fully immunized and that everyone wears an appropriate mask. If there are group members who are unable to participate in that way, the group should continue to meet virtually.

As part of our planning for opening the building, the Taskforce has asked Dave van Arsdale to talk with the engineers at First Unitarian who have devised inexpensive and effective portable air purifying boxes that can circulate and purify the air in our sanctuary and meeting spaces. These boxes cost \$80 to build and Dave will get specifications and construction advice. It is likely we can have them in place by November 7.

There are significant issues left to resolve. Among these are decisions about allowing events such as Eastman at Washington Square and the model railroad club’s open house to occur and under what circumstances. The Taskforce will be discussing these issues as well as more concrete elements of planning for opening for worship on November 7 at subsequent meetings.

Steve Munson, Chair, COVID Taskforce